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THE INDIAN MASSACRE AT YORK, MAINE

January 25, 1691-2.

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NEWTON, N. H.

One of the greatest, if not the greatest tragedy of Colonial days in New England has never had its story written in detail. References to the appalling massacre of the inhabitants of York, Maine, in the second Indian war, may be found in scattered contemporaneous records and in some general histories of that state, but they are either incomplete in detail, or give inadequate and incorrect reports of its actual horrors. The massacres at Deerfield, Mass., where about a score fell victims; at Salmon Falls, N. H., where about thirty were put to the knife and tomahawk, and at Schenectady, N. Y., where about sixty were slain, have had ample treatment by local and general historians, but the sudden and terrible slaughter of an undetermined number, certainly not less than fifty men, women and children in a few hours at York is here told for the first time with the advantage of a knowledge gained from the narratives of contemporary actors or writers, and the original reports of the French officials describing the raid.

It is the story of a bloody shambles staged by a relentless party of savages consisting of one hundred and fifty Abenakis, who descended on a peaceful village and nearly wiped it out of existence in a short and sanguinary struggle. Its location offered no special facilities for the foray, at least not more so than any one of the fringe of settlements in the frontier Province of Maine at that time, nor is it known that it was selected as the victim of a particular reprisal warfare engendered in this irrespressible conflict of race and religion then being waged between the French Catholics, the savage Indians, and the English Puritans. While it had suffered an attack in the first Indian war, with the loss of a few men, the experience was not unlike the neighboring villages along the coast of Maine during those troublous times. Nor was it the home of any English leader conspicuous in military affairs whom the French or their Indian allies wished to kill or capture as a matter of personal revenge, or in retaliation for anything its inhabitants had done in the war.

At the time of the events under consideration the town of York held a population of not more than five hundred souls, scatteringly

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housed in two settlements known then and unto this day as "Scituate" and "Scotland" from the origin of the dwellers in each locality. Those from Scituate, Mass., arriving about 1642-5 were the first to give a distinctive appellation to a section of York, and had joined the earliest arrivals of a prior decade who were settled at and near the mouth of York River, on its westward side, and these new arrivals took up unsettled lands to the eastward of the river as far as Cape Neddick. The Scotch rebels, or refugees, who came about ten years later took up land further inland and constituted a distinct element for several generations. In the half century that followed these settlements the population of York was concentrated along the seashore until the increasing pressure of numbers gradually pushed the farms backward for a couple of miles to accommodate the needs of agricultural development.

Sunday, January 24th, 1691-2, was the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, or, in the English notation, known as Candlemas, and on that day the pastor of the church of York preached to his little flock unaware that by nightfall of that winter Sabbath a horde of savages would reach the outskirts of the town in the silence of the night bent upon murder.¹ These "bloodhounds" as Cotton Mather called them, "had long been wishing that they might embrue their hands in the blood of some New English minister." Their wish was about to be gratified. That night the people of York slept "in their unguarded houses here and there scattered, quiet and secure."

Early the following morning young Arthur Bragdon² (Arthur¹.) had gone out into the woods back of the settlement in the direction of Mt. Agamenticus to set his traps, according to local tradition, and in making the rounds of his trap-line he came upon a pile of Indian snowshoes stacked against a large rock. While pondering upon the significance of this discovery, an Indian dog, tightly muzzled to prevent his barking and thereby precipitating an "alarm" from the houses nearest the encampment, fell on his trail and immediately disappeared into the woods whence he had emerged. This was the first point of contact on that memorable day between this unsuspecting lad and the large band of Indians who were making ready to execute their murderous design. The day was stormy and snow was falling.

¹"On the Sabbath next before his death, the good man, it is said, solemnly admonished his people to watch with prayer; and with a prophetic voice, as it proved, to beware of the enemy, pointing to them from the Scriptures the careless inhabitants of Laish, preceding the invasion of their land by the Danites, their foes." (*Sketches of Early Maine Ministers*, 2 Maine Historical Society, Collections, iv, 72).

At the foot of Mt. Agamenticus, eight miles from the shore, 150 Abenakis had hastily raised their rude wigwams the night before. They had come thither to carry out a plan probably evolved the previous year by members of their tribe who had been at the Sillery Mission "to form a war party."² It is evident from the French accounts that this town was attacked by design, as the statement is specifically made that the Indians "started out for a place named York against which they plotted mischief." They sent out scouts to ascertain the lay of the land and the conditions of defense, and evidently guided by the dog suddenly surprised young Bragdon busily engaged in setting his traps; they seized him, and a little later came across two other inhabitants who were probably going into the forest to cut wood as they were carrying their axes. The Indians, after this capture, held them long enough to interrogate the three prisoners and "two of them were tomahawked as soon as they had learned what they wished to know".³

"As it was snowing hard," wrote M. de Champigny, the author of the French account, "some wished to wait for clear weather, but the leading warriors to whom they gave ear rather than to the tribal chiefs, were of the opinion that it was best to attack in spite of the snow." It was about noon when they reached the outskirts of the settlement, and the savages were divided into two bands, one of which was probably given the task of attacking the settlement at Cape Neddick, the other the farms in "Scituate Row" scattered along shore at the Long Sands and on the eastern bank of the river. The party assigned to the latter section of the town secured among the first of their victims the beloved pastor of these people, Rev. Shubael Dummer, particulars of whose death will be described in detail later.

This was the beginning of a ruthless massacre which was carried

²This rehearsal of the already known facts of the massacre, as originally told by English witnesses and related by contemporary writers, is here supplemented for the first time by the official reports of M. de Champigny, Intendant of Quebec, prepared for the information of the French Minister of the Colonies. A Copy of this report is in the Parkman Mss, (Library of the Massachusetts Historical Society), and it is here translated to illustrate the story of the massacre as told by the Indians to Champigny. Parkman made slight use of it in his "Count Frontenac and New France under Louis XIV," (Champlain Ed. x, 124-7).

³The French report states that "the third was bound." It is evident from the context that it was young Bragdon who was spared, (see Mss. Genealogy of "The Bragdons of York" by Dr. C. E. Banks in the Library of the N. E. Hist-Gen. Society). Young Bragdon was then about 20 years of age.

out with devilish ingenuity according to a preconcerted plan. "Our men separated in little bands of two or three" wrote Champigny, "and in two or three hours laid waste the region for about a league and a half." The startled inhabitants hearing the first shots rushed from their homes only to find themselves "invested with horrid savages who immediately killed many of those unprovided inhabitants" and followed up their butcheries by putting their dwelling houses to the torch. "Three garrisons", said Champigny, "and a very great number of English dwellings were burned;" and, he adds, "after much resistance and terrified shrieking" the orgy terminated through lack of human material to swell the list of victims.⁴ All this happened on the north-east side of the river, and so unprepared were the settlers for defending this onslaught that but one Abenaki was killed in the attack, and "him they buried in the cellar of an English house before putting it to the torch"; nor did they stop with human prey, for "an Abenaki who was one of the leading warriors and who relates all this," said Champigny "could make no estimate of the number of horses, cattle, sheep and swine that were killed and burned," but this warrior, however, was able to make an inventory of the number of victims slaughtered by his band and said "that he himself counted more than a hundred English killed."⁵ This same authority, with a show of pious *naivete*, relates that "our people spared the lives of a dozen little children and three old English women whom they sent to the nearest garrison." The occasion of the return of the latter was made an opportunity of sending a message to the nearest remaining garrison house in that vicinity not yet destroyed and the French narrative thus relates this incident:—

⁴Judge David Sewall of York, in an account written in 1792 on the anniversary of the event, stated that all the houses on the north side of the river were burnt or destroyed, "except four garrisoned houses, viz:—Alcocks, Prebbles, Harmons and Nortons," (N. E. Gen. Reg. xxix, 108). In a separate Journal covering these events Champigny wrote that the Indians had "burned more than 60 houses." Captain Floyd in his account states "there is about seventeen or eighteen houses burned." The difference between 17 and 60 may be due to the inclusion by the Indians of all buildings, barns, etc., which they classed as "houses."

⁵Rev. George Burroughs in a letter from Wells, dated 27 Jan., 1691-2, gives this picture of the attack by the Indians as told him "by a Captive youth who made his escape from them, as the beholding of the Pillours of Smoke, the rageing of the merciless flames, the insultations of the heathen enemy, shooting, hacking, (not having regard to the earnest supplication of men, women, or Children, with sharpe cryes & bitter teares in most humble manner,) & dragging away others, (& none to help) is most affecting the heart."

"They demanded that the English leader surrender the garrison or else come out and give battle; or, if he intended to pursue them they would wait near there a couple of days to give him time; but if he came out (before giving battle) they would knock in the head all the English captives. They sent him (they said) some little children and old women upon whom they had compassion, a thing that an Englishman never would have done and from this he could judge of the supreme contempt they had for him."

Concerning this same incident Mather stated that the Indians "sent in their summons to some of the garrison houses; and those garrisons, whereof some had no more than two or three men in them, yet being so well manned as to reply, 'that they would spend their blood unto the last drop, ere they would surrender:' these cowardly miscreants had not mettle enough to meddle with 'em, so they retired into their howling thickets."

Of the numerical results of this raid and massacre at York the French and contemporary English accounts differ widely. Champigny, quoting his Abenaki informant, who had "himself counted more than one hundred English killed," gives us the maximum number of victims, and it is probable that allowance must be made for the boasting of his Indian allies as to their prowess. The first account of the casualties was written by Capt. John Floyd, in command of the troops stationed at Portsmouth, who went immediately to the relief of York, when the news of the attack reached him. He states: "When we came we found Capt Alcocks & Lieut Prebles Garisons both standing the greatest part of the whole town was burnd & robd & the Heathen had killed & Caried Captive 140—48 of which are kild & 3 or 4 wounded & the rest Caried away."⁶

Francis Hooke of Kittery, whose information must have been derived from survivors of the attack, in a letter to the Governor, dated January 28, 1691/2, said "in generall ther is 137 men, wemen and children kild and caryed away Captive; about 100 of them captivated are gone eastward."⁷ The inference from this statement is that thirty-seven were killed. The Rev. Robert Pike recorded in his Journal that there were "kiled about 48 persons & carried captive 73."⁸ Lawrence Hammond, another contemporary entered in his journal "140 persons missing, about 40 killd & buryed by Capt Flood & his Company."⁹

⁶² Maine Historical Society, v, 314-5.

⁷Ibid, 317.

⁸¹ Proc. Mass. Hist. Soc. xiv, 127.

⁹² Proc. Mass. Hist. Soc. vii, 160.

Cotton Mather stated that "the savages" murdered about fifty and captivated near an hundred."¹⁰ Among the later historians, Niles states "they had killed 50 and captived 100 of the miserable inhabitants,"¹¹ and Williamson states that "about 75 people were killed."¹²

It seems impossible to reconcile these widely divergent statements. In attempting to adjust them it should be borne in mind that a considerable number who were taken captive either died on the march or never returned, and these should be added to the maximum number given by local English diarists of that period. It must therefore be concluded that the number "counted" by the Abenaki warrior as one hundred must be considerably discounted, as mathematical accuracy, in the hurry and confusion of this gruesome business is not to be expected, and it is doubtful if any one of them spent the time at its conclusion to make a detailed survey of the day's work. It is, however, safe to say that between fifty and seventy-five either lost their lives immediately or perished soon after.

The dramatic touch to this tragedy was given in the death of Shubael Dummer. "He was a gentleman well descended," wrote Mather, "well tempered, well educated, and now short of 60 years of age." He was son of Mr. Richard and Jane (Mason) Dummer of Newbury, Mass., born in Roxbury, Mass., February 17, 1636.¹³ He was graduated from Harvard College in the class of 1656.¹⁴ and was preaching in York as early as 1662,¹⁵ but was not ordained until December 3rd, 1673, when he preached his own ordination sermon, taking Psalms LXXX, 14, for his text. It is probable that his ministerial services began as early as 1660 if not earlier. He resided on a part of the property of his father-in-law, John Alcock, situated near Little River, now known as the Norwood Farms. At the time of his death he had, therefore, been the spiritual leader of the town for about thirty years. Of the manner of his death the French report says "he was brought down with a musket shot while trying to escape on his horse." One of the early historians of Maine states that he was "found by some of his

¹⁰Magnalia, (Hartford ed. Ch. vii, art. XV).

¹¹3 Mass. Hist. Coll. vi, 227, "History of the Indian Wars," written in 1760.

¹²History of Maine, i, 629. Judge David Sewall of York, writing in 1792 said "from the best accounts we have, about 50 persons were killed outright and 100 captivated."

¹³Aspinwall, Notarial Records, 297.

¹⁴Sibley, Harvard Graduates, i, 474.

¹⁵Sewall, History of the Quakers.

surviving neighbors fallen dead upon his face near his own door."¹⁶ A contemporary diarist adds that he was "found cut in pieces."¹⁷ Cotton Mather, in his usual turgid style gives us this version: "This good man was just going to take horse at his own door upon a journey in the service of God, when the tygres that were making their depredations upon the sheep of York seiz'd upon this their shepherd; and they shot him so that they left him dead among the tribe of Abel upon the ground."¹⁸

According to Champigny, which is corroborated by Mather, his wife was taken captive and she was probably one of the "three old English women" who had been granted life and freedom to return, but, adds Champigny, "she returned twice to ask for her son who was among the captives, and they told her that as she wished it she should be added to the number, but she had not much more than reached the Abenakis village when she died of grief." This newly discovered information effectually disposes of the statement originally made by Williamson, that the wife of Parson Dummer was a daughter of Edward Rishworth.¹⁹ This has been repeated in recent years and passed current as an historical verity until the late Nathaniel G. Marshall of York, Me., questioned its accuracy.²⁰ It is easy, with the evidence now available, to disprove this alleged alliance. Edward Rishworth had but one daughter, Mary, born January 8, 1660, and she had a rather full and varied matrimonial experience, surviving four husbands and living as late as January, 1732.²¹ She, with two of her daughters by her second husband, John Sayward, was captured at the time of the massacre and taken to Montreal, where she was put in service to the widow of a high official of that city. She was baptized in Montreal at the Church of Notre Dame, December 8, 1693, as Marie Magdalen Plaisted, the name of her fourth husband.

While Rishworth's daughter was successively marrying four husbands, Shubael Dummer was the husband of one wife, as early as October, 1675, and this wife is shown by settlements of estate in which he took part as administrator and heir. She was Lydia Alcock,

¹⁶Williamson, i, 629.

¹⁷Hammond, *ut supra*.

¹⁸Magnalia, ch. 7, art. xv.

¹⁹Williamson, i, 630.

²⁰N. E. Hist.-Gen. Register, xxxi, 219, where Mr. Marshall controverts the statement copied by Sibley in his *Harvard Graduates* (i, 474), that Dummer married a daughter of Rishworth.

²¹York Deeds, xi, 63.

daughter of Mr. John and Elizabeth () Alcock of York, and in July, 1675, she shared in the division of her father's estate as "Mrs. Lydia Dummer."²² Five years later she was still his wife, and in a letter to George Snell, dated June 22nd, 1691, Shubael Dummer called him "brother Snell," a relationship based on the marriage of Snell to Hannah Alcock, sister of Mrs. Lydia (Alcock) Dummer.

Williamson records the information, probably a tradition gathered by him in York, that the Indians stripped the body of the Parson of its apparel, and during the march through the wilderness "on the next Lord's Day a full welted savage, purposely to deride the ministerial character of Mr. Dummer, put on his garments, and then stalked about in the presence of the distressed captives some of whom belonged to his church, to aggravate their feelings."²³ Mather could not let this impious masquerade pass without characterizing this Indian as "a Demon transformed into an angel of light;" and he closes his disquisition on the death of his colleague with the following epitaph:

"Dummer, the shepherd sacrific'd
"By wolves, because the sheep he priz'd.
"The orphan's father, church's light
"The love of heav'n, of hell the spight."

"The Countries gapman, and the face
"That shone, but knew it not, with grace.
"Hunted by devils, but reliev'd
"By angels, and on high receiv'd."

"The martyred Pelican, who bled
"Rather than leave his charge unfed.
"A proper bird of paradise
"Shot, and flown thither in a trice."

"Lord, hear the cry of righteous Dummer's wounds,
"Ascending still against the salvage hounds,
"That worry thy dear flocks, and let the cry
"Add force to theirs that at thine altar lye."

²²Mass. Archives, xvi, 87. Further confirmation of this marriage is to be found in an article on the Alcock Family of Maine by Dr. C. E. Banks in N. E. Hist-Gen. Register, xxxvi, 401.

²³2 Maine Historical Society, iv, 72.





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